

The decade of the 1920s offered a slight whiff of affluence for my parents' generation. One polo spur and a photograph of the Mertzon Polo Club hanging on the wall of the office attest to a lifestyle different than the hard work and lean times the Depression to come would bring.

Just the other day, a neighbor recalled that his dad, (one of the Boss's teammates in the photograph), spent the summer playing polo in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. His father took the family along to live in a hotel, plus 10 or 12 Thoroughbred horses to board at the polo barn.

Some contrast to my neighbor's deal today running a sheep and cow outfit, using a calculator and a yellow pad to stick and ball his game over a field cut up in tax tables and freight bills.

We shared a laugh at our fathers' pranks, yet the laughter resounded hollow enough to echo over the telephone. Laughter is a luxury in the shortgrass country. Men and women conserve their emotional strength. By the time an ol' gal or ol' boy stiff-arms the way to safety, they better not have wasted breath because of the dust, or shed tears because of the constant threat of dehydration.

Always hard to pinpoint boom times out here. Under the old order, by the time Grandfather shook loose from the bank, he co-signed a note for his son or grandson.

Prosperity for either of the three generations lasted until three rains three weeks apart totaling three-tenths of an

inch ignited a fever to buy solidmouth ewes for early lambs and winter feed bills to add brokenmouth cows for late calving and prickly pear harvesting.

And inch rains set off stampedes to the markets that'd make forty-niners think they were on a trail ride to the California hills to smell the wildflowers. A half-dozen yellow-headed blackbirds, a wet weather sign of indisputable force, sent many a herder racing to the stockyards ready to bet his last hundred dollars on a call by two-tone birds that couldn't tell a thunder cloud from the shadow of the closest courthouse.

And the wildness had music and passion. Sheep running across truck decking tapped the same beat as fat lambs pressing the scale floors. A buyer drawing his pencil from a bullet holder to write a bank draft made a special whoosh, heralding pay dirt, bank night, grand prize, good times.

Weaned calves bawling in the night stillness raced the flow of blood to bodies too taut to relax. Cows milling around pasture gates, minds set on going over or under the fence, fueled the excitement. Bulls bellowing at watering roused the senses to a battle pitch as the bellicose oxen matched power struggles in billowing dust and lunged and fell crippled to the side.

It was a booted and hatted world stoked by anticipation of a big strike — a big win by a big score. Strikes and wins big as the winter lamb country at San Saba, or scores as huge as a trainload of steers to the

blue grass in Kansas. It was railheads, depots, truckers, herders, cowboys and horses to the tune of boxcar doors slamming shut, telegraph keys clattering, punch sticks banging, profane demands and orders, wet sweatbands and dry lips, and falling, bucking horseflesh setting a western scene never to be revived again.

And the show didn't need klieg lights, or even sunlight. It was a common occurrence to hear a bunkhouse tale of driving cattle from Rocky Creek to Angelo some 15 miles to hit town at daylight with the herd.

During the short spurts of good times, it took a special knack to avoid materialism. Had to be strong to resist profiteering. I sold Angora goats one fall for \$1.75 a head. If I hadn't acted before the South African hair market shot to six bucks on kid hair in October, the IRS would have demanded the ranch pay taxes on a quarterly basis instead of filing whenever my tax identification number needed renewing.

Don't know where the talent to hold during good markets came from. Always won more hands playing low ball than high card stud. Closest I ever came to doubling my money was in the Fifties, the spring when empty burlap feed sacks took a big jump from a nickel to a dime.

But the Big Boss and his cronies played on all the fields — polo, hunting, or the tracks. They bet more money on the fall steer roping than my goat crop brought for the five-year life of the business. Don't recall ever seeing a

photo of a team of goat herders. If I do, I am going to
hang it on the office wall to preserve my history ...